

REMARKS BY PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH
“Building Learning Communities”
Georgia Tech Faculty Club, July 7, 1999

The word “college” comes from the Latin “collegium” which means society. And that is what I want to talk about with you today – the importance of the social aspect of higher education and the need to be a little more deliberate about building “collegium” at Georgia Tech... to make this campus a community.

The dictionary definition of a community is “an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location.” We certainly have various kinds of individuals at Georgia Tech, and we have a common location on this campus. Where we need to improve in order to achieve community is in the “interacting” part of the definition.

All of us want Georgia Tech to be a world-class university. That is one of our top priorities. But in the course of concentrating on our formal academic and research credentials, we have gotten a little thin on “collegium”... on the relationships that connect students, faculty and staff across the traditional boundaries.

I know it’s difficult. When I was a student more than three decades ago, Georgia Tech was smaller, its students were mostly engineering undergraduates, and what the faculty mostly did was teach undergraduates. Over the years since then, you as faculty have become busier with research and graduate students. We also have more students per faculty member than we used to. As Atlanta as sprawled, so did our faculty, and many now live farther away from campus than used to be the case. “Collegium” has gotten harder to find, and you have less time to look for it.

Our students are also feeling the lack of “collegium.” The kids we are admitting to Georgia Tech are brighter and more promising than ever before. Their SAT scores and GPAs are higher than ever, and they have impressive track records of involvement at their high schools.

But something happens after they get here. Our campus is a far different place than the high schools they left behind. And they barely have a chance to get their bearings before they are caught up on a fast-paced academic treadmill that keeps them focused on getting each day’s assignments done on time. Seven years after enrolling, only 70 percent of them have graduated.

Of the 30 percent that we lose, half fall by the wayside during their freshman year. They are not failing academically, and only a few of them decide they really don’t want to be engineers after all. Most of the students who leave have not become involved as participants in campus life. They feel disconnected, isolated and left out. Research verifies that a major factor in negative student outcomes is lack of community among students.

We are also coming to realize that too much of education is delivered piecemeal in disjointed little snippets. Individual professors teach separate courses to separate sets of students, with little to connect the subject matter of one course to that of another, let alone to real life.

These problems are not unique to Georgia Tech. Colleges and universities all across the nation are wrestling with them. From the University of North Dakota to the University of Miami; from Temple University in Philadelphia to the University of Hawaii, institutions of higher education are building “learning communities.”

More than 100 years ago, Henry Ward Beecher wrote that “there are three schoolmasters for everybody that will employ them – the senses, intelligent companions, and books.” Of course, students bring their senses with them, but we must do more than simply supplying the sources of knowledge. Building learning communities means providing that third ingredient – intelligent companions.

The learning communities that are now developing in higher education are as varied as the institutions themselves, but they all have the same goal: to build formal and informal intellectual relationships that connect students, faculty and staff, and academic subjects with each other.

I encountered a number of the fore-runners of today’s learning communities along the way through my own career. At Duke, we built informal relationships between students and faculty across the disciplines through “living groups.” Four or five faculty members were paired with each student residence unit, from dorm floors to fraternities and sororities.

At Virginia Tech, we had reading groups made of students and faculty across the disciplines. Each group read four books over the course of the year – two technical books and two literary books – and we met informally to discuss them. The English majors were always impressed at the ability of the engineers to understand the technical stuff, and the engineers gained a new respect for the ability of the English majors to wrestle with deeper concepts and communicate their ideas.

Informal activities like these were an important part of campus life, and helped students connect with each other, with faculty and with subject matter. And they continue to have an important role to play. But many colleges and universities have recognized the need to do more.

Our neighbor, Georgia State University, uses “FIGs” which is an acronym for Freshman Interest Groups. Incoming freshmen do not register for individual courses. Instead, they sign up for a FIG – a learning group that is based on their interests and prospective major. The students in each Freshman Interest Group take a cluster of core courses together. Each group shares one or more faculty advisors, and each is assigned several juniors and seniors with related majors who serve as peer mentors. This experience lays the groundwork and makes the personal connections freshmen need to successfully pursue their goals at Georgia State.

Some schools with a more residential orientation take an even more comprehensive approach to FIGs. At the University of Mississippi, for example, incoming freshmen are put into groups of 20. Each group not only takes its core courses together, but also lives together in the same residence hall.

Other schools help students make connections with each other and between subjects by pairing academic courses across the curriculum. For example, calculus might be paired with physics, or

American government with public speaking. Students take both courses simultaneously, and participate in discussion groups that inter-relate the subject material.

Still other models of learning communities connect faculty members in teaching teams that reach across the disciplines. Not only are freshmen grouped to take core courses together, but the courses themselves are combined into large interdisciplinary study blocks that are team-taught. This approach provides flexibility, encourages peer mentoring among faculty, and promotes sharing of ideas for teaching and utilizing technology.

These are just some of the many ideas colleges and universities are trying to foster learning relationships on their campuses. It is a significant development in higher education.

Here at Georgia Tech, our steps toward building learning communities have been more modest and low-key. We have the Freshman Experience, which houses groups of 15 to 18 students together. Each group has a faculty member and an upperclass peer leader assigned to it. It has proved a positive experience in helping freshmen connect with each other and the broader campus community.

We are developing a web-enhanced curriculum as part of the initiative that requires students to own computers, and some of our web-enhanced courses are building virtual communities. We have also expanded student affairs programming, and our students have taken the lead in creating "Team Buzz," bringing students, faculty and staff together for a day of community service.

We are now poised to take another step with next year's freshmen. And I want to recognize and commend Lee Wilcox and Bob McMath who have worked closely together to develop this new initiative. No matter what the design of learning communities, they invariably take a lot of coordination between student services and the academic side of things. Bob and Lee are making it work at Georgia Tech.

Two hundred of next year's freshmen will be randomly selected to be our guinea pigs in this experiment with learning communities. They will be divided into groups of 25, and during first semester each group will take three core classes together – English, math and Psych 1010.

Compared to the programs I've just described, it's a rather small-scale proposal. We are not asking anybody to team teach, or changing the content of the English and math courses. But we plan to use Psych 1010 more fully to encourage students to reflect on the bigger-picture significance of what they learn in class and to help them identify and develop their learning styles. We also intend to provide ample encouragement for them to form study groups. Research shows that study groups are a positive experience that improves academic performance, and once students get into study groups, they tend to continue that pattern.

We are also not going to house each group of 25 as a unit, as many learning communities do, but the members of each group will live close to each other in the same housing complex, so that it will be easy for study groups to get together.

As you can see, we are not jumping headlong into deep water here, but rather sticking a toe into the expanding pool of programs to build learning communities. Our goal is to make it a little easier for freshmen to get to know each other, to form study groups, and to be a little more thoughtful about things like learning styles, the big-picture value of the education they are receiving, and the threads that connect courses and disciplines to each other.

I believe our goal should be to develop a whole menu of opportunities for students and faculty to relate and interact in both formal and informal learning experiences. And I hope that you will be creative in proposing ideas and in helping us decide which direction to move.

As I mentioned, some of our web-enhanced courses are already building virtual communities within classes and disciplines. Do we want to create virtual communities across the curriculum as well? Do we want to take our freshman programs a step farther and create FIGs? Should we use the Freshman Experience as a first step in getting more faculty involved with residence halls? What kinds of extracurricular activities will promote greater informal interaction among faculty, students and staff?

These are some of the questions we need to think about as we build learning communities and create a stronger sense of community on this campus. And if you've got any good ideas, Bob McMath, Lee Wilcox and I would be glad to hear them.